



Demand for dental care among needy on rise

The growing number of low-income residents in the Fox Valley will soon receive greater access to dental care.

By: Kathy Walsh Nufer

Facilities are being expanded for two clinics — the Fox Cities Community Health Center's dental clinic and the Tri-County Community Dental Clinic — which serve people in Calumet, Outagamie and Winnebago counties who cannot afford private dental care.

Demand is so great that the Fox Cities Community Health Center's dental clinic has outgrown its quarters in Menasha and is moving to a larger facility in Grand Chute.

There, with the aid of an \$800,000 loan for nonprofits serving the needy, access to dental care can be expanded significantly for low-income children and adults.

The Tri-County Community Dental Clinic, Grand Chute, also plans to expand. It has filed a permit with the state to add two more treatment rooms to its current eight.

"We get people from the Fox Valley who don't know how to brush their teeth, and families where they all share one toothbrush," Kristene Stacker, health center executive director, said. "We see 12- and 14-year-old children who have never seen a dentist."

Stacker said the health center's latest statistics indicate 85,000 people in the tri-county service area have incomes that fall below federal poverty guidelines, compared with about 62,000 two years ago.

She said the need for dental care among this population is so extensive that there is more than enough work for both clinics. The health center's clinic does more preventive dentistry and refers emergencies to the Tri-County Community Dental Clinic, which handles about a dozen emergencies daily in addition to its regular schedule of patients.

"When we opened with four dental chairs here, we knew we would outgrow it within 18 months, but we needed to get something started," Stacker said of the health center's current site at 1814 N. Appleton Road, Menasha.

Remodeling of a leased building at 5337 Grande Market Drive west of Fox River Mall began Nov. 15. The new facility, which will have a total of 15 chairs, will open Feb. 1.

The health center's dental clinic opened in January 2009 and had 4,400 visits the first year. It expects to top 6,700 visits by the end of 2010.

"For the last several months, we have been turning away 25 to 50 people a day," Stacker said. "Many of those calling are parents of children with Medical Assistance, trying to take care of their kids' dental health needs."

Stacker said the health center's dental clinic and Tri-County Community Dental Clinic may be the only clinics north of Milwaukee that accept new Medical Assistance patients.

"Some dentists accept very limited Medicaid patients, but not new patients," she said.

Tri-County Community Dental Clinic is forecasting patient visits to increase from 6,800 in 2009 to over 7,100 in 2010, according to executive director Bob Glass. This is in addition to the Focus on the Children Program, which is experiencing a 36 percent participation growth in participation within schools.

"Fluoride applications for children are up nearly 2,000 children and sealants are up over 400 children in 2010 with two months to go," he said.

Tri-County Community Dental Clinic's Focus on the Children program has signed up 47 of 67 elementary schools in the three counties, with Shiocton and Omro among the newest. Glass said Oshkosh, the pilot district, had 1,570 children qualify last year. This year the number rose by 250 children.

The expansion of the health center's dental clinic is a big step, Stacker said. "We're really excited for this project because it not only will increase dental access in our community, but will also allow us to increase access to both medical and mental health care, particularly to the uninsured."

Once the dental facility is remodeled and access expanded, the space vacated at the current dental clinic will be remodeled to create four more medical exam rooms and three more mental health rooms.

The health center plans to add three full-time dentists, plus two hygienists to existing staff, along with dental assistants and other support staff. Overall, it will add 20 full-time jobs, including a mental health therapist and a physician.

Stacker said the generosity of attorney Jim Long, the dental clinic's new landlord, has been a big help — as has the loan from IFF, which provides below-market loans to nonprofits that serve low-income populations, primarily for real estate expansion.

"We started lending in Wisconsin a few years ago and to date have made nearly \$25 million in loans in Wisconsin," mostly Milwaukee, said Lanie Wasserman, director of the IFF-Wisconsin Office. "This is our very first loan in Appleton and we are really excited that it is for an organization that is working so hard to provide high quality patient care to the uninsured."

Taking on a loan of this size is a risk, Stacker said, "but the community needs this desperately and essentially the only way we were able to do that was to lease a building rather than build out on our existing building."

She expects the loan to be paid back through donations, grants and patient revenues. "A high percentage of our dental patients are medical assistance patients, meaning we get paid for their visits through BadgerCare and other state funding," Stacker said.